

Pilot answers prayers with Wings of Hope

By Rebecca Ferman, Jewish Light Staff | Posted: Wednesday, July 22, 2015 11:15 am

In November of 2012, Dick Horowitz chose to spend his 67th birthday a little differently than most people would: flying a plane from Ohio to Kansas to reunite an ill passenger with her family. When they arrived at their destination, a cheering crowd was waiting to meet them.

Horowitz is a pilot for the international, nonprofit Wings of Hope organization, which means he spends a lot of time providing free air travel to those who medically need it. In this case, he was transporting a woman with muscular dystrophy who had been unable to move to Kansas with the rest of her family. After several months of separation, she was finally able to join them.

As Horowitz talked with a grateful family member, he revealed what the day really meant to him.

“I said, ‘This is a very special day for me.’ And she said, ‘Because of this?’ I said, ‘Yes, and because of one other thing. Today is my birthday.’ She said, ‘Oh my God, that you would do this instead of celebrating your birthday is incredible.’ And I said, ‘No, the thing that’s incredible is that I have the opportunity and ability to do this for you.’ ”

Horowitz said of the day, “It was the best birthday present ever.”

Since its founding in St. Louis in 1962, Wings of Hope has provided medical air transport and other aviation-related services to thousands of people in the United States and 47 countries around the world. Among its many awards and achievements, the organization has been nominated twice for a Nobel Peace Prize.

“It’s been a privilege to be involved with aviation, and being involved with Wings of Hope is my way of giving back,” Horowitz said.

The main mission of Wings of Hope is to transport patients with serious illnesses or disabilities — 85 percent of whom are children — so that they can receive life-saving care at the best medical facilities. Wings of Hope also helps communities in need. Volunteers have dug wells in remote villages so that residents can have much easier access to water and have helped breed and raise chickens in villages where people were starving, thus providing them with a sustainable source of food.



Dick Horowitz

Dick Horowitz standing next to one of the Wings of Hope planes. Photo: Rebecca Ferman

Overwhelmingly, support has come from celebrities such as actors Kurt Russell and Harrison Ford, as well as from former U.S. Sens. John Danforth and Elizabeth Dole, musician Roy Clark, and Sherrill Kazan Alvarez de Toledo, president of the World Council of Peoples for the United Nations.

Wings of Hope also is supported by the Champions for Kids program and receives many individual donations. All of the pilots for the organization are volunteers, and a lot of the planes are donated from airports across the United States.

“Wings of Hope is a faith-based organization, but it is not a religious organization,” Horowitz said. “It certainly doesn’t discriminate against any religion. In fact, it doesn’t discriminate against anybody for any reason whatsoever. The central theme is that we are here to help people who need help, to help them have a better life in some way.”

Horowitz, the chief volunteer pilot for Wings of Hope, was born in Pittsburgh to Russian-Jewish parents. Although his parents were Orthodox, he became a bar mitzvah at a Reform synagogue. He attended Penn State for mechanical engineering and then spent four years in the Navy, which in turn sent him to Purdue University. While he was there, Horowitz was the president of its Hillel Foundation. It was in 1968 that Horowitz discovered his love for flying after he joined Purdue’s Flying Club.

“I was hooked on flying, and that’s most of what I’ve done ever since then,” he said. “I didn’t really plan on flying professionally, but I never did anything else after I started flying. It just seemed that every decision I made, without realizing the bigger picture, was getting me closer and closer to doing flying as a profession.”

Before he came to work with Wings of Hope, Horowitz had plenty of flying experience. He was a flight instructor for five years, worked for an air taxi company and was employed by Peabody Energy for 30 years. After retiring as the chief pilot for Peabody Energy, Horowitz began volunteering at Wings of Hope in 2012. As the chief volunteer pilot, he helps train new pilots and select new equipment.

Anne Volland, director of administration for the organization, says Horowitz is an influential leader and very involved with training pilots.

“Dick is a great asset to Wings of Hope,” she said. “He’s a wonderful humanitarian and a very kind person, and we couldn’t ask for a better chief pilot.”

Horowitz, who will turn 70 in November, says he enjoys nothing more than volunteering with Wings of Hope.

“It’s nice to get money for what you do, but there is an extent to which being able to help your fellow man is a gift that transcends getting paid,” he said. “It’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

Horowitz lives in Chesterfield with his wife Pasty Fitzgerald, who is also a volunteer for the

organization. They have two children and three grandchildren.

The base for Wings of Hope is located next to the Spirit of St. Louis Airport in Chesterfield at 18370 Wings of Hope Boulevard. To learn more about the organization, go to wings-of-hope.org.